

# What Employers Are Really Looking For

*By Rich Paul, MSW, CEAP*

**W**e know that it is now more imperative than ever before that we engage individuals as managers of their health — making good lifestyle decisions and being wise consumers of health care services. Employers want proven intervention strategies that reduce human capital risks and boost productivity, as well as communication methods that effectively engage employees to make good health care and lifestyle decisions. Essentially, we need to get in employees' heads, so that we can support and guide the whole person.

We can do this through a series of identification and targeting activities, beginning at the macro level until we are reaching individuals with personalized information and services. By using analytical methods adopted from marketing and coupling them with an understanding of human behavior, we can equip organizations to develop focused intervention strategies and communications that move individuals to action. It is possible to identify an organization's unique risk profile, understand the values and communication preferences of at-risk segments of the population, and push out targeted messages.

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Retailers have long known that successful sales are dependent upon understanding the unique needs of the consumer by geography and lifestyle attributes. We can do the same with the delivery of certain health benefits and employee services such as the EAP. Services must be uniquely targeted based upon the needs of individual employees and work groups, and we can anticipate what those workplace needs will be. We can think of many retailers who have successfully made the transition from a “push production,” where they have a product or service to sell that they “push” to the end consumer or end user, to a “pull production” whereby the consumer drives what needs to be purchased. Certain retail organizations have accomplished this

by revolutionizing the use of the bar code, which allowed products to be positioned, stocked and sold based upon consumer needs.

From an EAP perspective, I see this as a marriage of two industries that study human behavior ... marketing and behavioral health. The idea is that engagement contributes to positive outcomes, and that we can engage employees by better understanding their motivations, likes and dislikes. If we can target certain interventions to specific human capital risks and we can manage risks by using resources more effectively, then we can offer employers solutions to engage the workforce and build an environment that fosters employee resiliency, improves employee health and performance, and manages benefit expenditures more effectively.

Obviously, there are both somewhat simplistic and highly sophisticated predictive modeling techniques that exist, but imagine for a moment if you were able to leverage knowledge of lifestyle attributes, employer data (including such things as absence data, productivity data, safety data and the like) and benefits information such as medical risks, pharmacy data, etc ... to target services at an individual employee level? This would ensure the most effective use of resources and very likely reduce an employer’s overall benefit expenditures.

Given that we can take a snapshot of a workforce by evaluating lifestyle interests, demographics, behaviors/ attitudes, and socioeconomic indicators, we can also look at how to most effectively communicate to an employee population. Too often we

Generation	Channel	Text/Graphic Messages
<b>Traditional Generation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print media — newsletters, brochures</li> <li>• In-person, lecture-oriented workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honor and dignity</li> <li>• Respect for institutions</li> <li>• Family security and protection</li> <li>• Salute to values</li> <li>• Nostalgic embrace of “how it used to be”</li> <li>• Emphasize quality and history of program</li> </ul>
<b>Baby-Boomer Generation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A mix of print and electronic media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cutting-edge services</li> <li>• Prestige</li> <li>• Material rewards</li> <li>• Demonstrate value for money</li> </ul>
<b>Generation X</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electronic, visual media — videos, television ads, CD- or website-based Flash demonstrations or streaming video, HTML e-mail</li> <li>• Include opportunities to register online for web-based seminars or order free information or self-help kits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivated by family themes, health and fitness</li> <li>• Promote benefit to family</li> <li>• Provide a mix of options/services</li> <li>• More is better</li> </ul>
<b>Generation Y</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electronic, visual media — videos, television ads, CD- or website-based Flash demonstrations or streaming video, HTML e-mail</li> <li>• Include opportunities to register online for web-based seminars or order free information or self-help kits</li> <li>• In-person, lecture-oriented workshops and opportunities that allow for practice and role-playing — particularly for enhancing relationship skills both at work and at home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create takeoffs of popular movie scenes and scripting</li> <li>• Use sports-related analogies</li> <li>• Have an ethnic orientation, particularly borrowing from African-American, Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander cultures</li> </ul>

communicate the availability of benefits information (particularly prevention and educational-focused information) to the masses or to those known to be at greatest risk based upon past utilization experience. It is rare, however, particularly in an EAP, that we communicate important health information based upon demographic and lifestyle characteristics and known communication preferences.

I was fortunate recently to have directed a SAMHSA grant project along with George Washington University's Ensuring Solutions program that looked at how to promote EAP services more effectively to the younger worker, ages 16-24. We saw the value in extending this original dictate to helping organizations harness the unique skills and attributes of each generational group of workers and minimizing the negative impact of unaddressed social, behavioral and physical health concerns. The project team developed an educational CD-ROM to assist organizational leaders in the promotion of their EAP and to raise awareness at a company-wide level of how best to communicate to employees of all generations. The materials focused on helping organizations engage the multigenerational workforce with tools and information to:

- (1) manage and motivate talent;
- (2) engage all employees for a productive work environment; and to
- (3) align benefits with the needs of each generational group.

Critical to engaging each segment of the employee population is an understanding of both the channel and text or graphic message that will resonate best with a given generation. The table on page 30 illustrates at a high level what I am referring to.

Lifestyle profiling is based on the assumption that: (1) lifestyles influence consumer behavior; (2) lifestyle groups are linked to consumer attributes and preferences; and (3) lifestyle segmentation enables effective analytical modeling. This method equips us to better understand and therefore communicate and engage different groups.

This is why I said we need to focus on employees' heads! We need to focus on the *mental and behavioral* side of the

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health care equation, because those are often the source of the physical problems. And, mentally-healthier people will be physically sick less often — and, if they are physically ill, they will usually recover faster. Who better to do this than the EAP professional?

We also need to ensure that we are diligent in increasing the productivity of ALL employees, whether this is with such things as

smoking cessation, weight loss, dealing with difficult situations, and/or time management. We need to help employees do better on the job where it counts — not just feel better. We need to focus on reducing overall health care costs and improving productivity, presenteeism and morale by providing excellent care to employees. We do this by anticipating their needs and engaging them.

The employer landscape is one in which management has implemented a wide variety of recruitment strategies, employee development programs, compensation plans, benefit plans, performance incentives and employee assistance programs — all in an effort to minimize the risks associated with their human capital challenges. These risks often include such things as: (1) recruitment and retention; (2) absenteeism; (3) inappropriate use of health benefits; (4) disability and return to work; (5) employee controversy; (6) corporate crime; and (7) productivity. When we look at today's workplace, we would all probably agree that it is characterized by high levels of stress, mergers/acquisitions, downsizing and layoffs, rising health care costs, a global marketplace, increased competition, and ever-advancing technology. Clearly, something more is needed. The challenge employers are struggling with is how to improve employee health and performance while managing benefit expenditures. The more we understand about consumer behavior, the better we are positioned to "sell" health. ■

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